

COLUMNISTS

Faith should call us to political action for poor

Two unrelated news items caught my eye last week. Taken together, they highlight a paradox of contemporary life that affects all of us. The first item appeared in *The New York Times*. It described a study conducted by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, a Washington organization that advocates tax and spending policies to benefit the poor. The study showed how the gap between rich and poor in our country has grown over the past few years. In one startling statistic, it is reported that the richest 2.7 million Americans, the top one percent, have "as many after-tax dollars to spend as the bottom 100 million (combined)."

Furthermore, that ratio has more than doubled since 1977, when the top one percent had as much as the bottom 49 million, according to the Congressional Budget Office. In 1997, 142,566 Americans reported \$1 million or more gross income for 1997, nearly two-thirds more than the 86,998 in 1995. These are remarkable statistics. As the total "economic pie" of our country grows, those at the bottom of the economic ladder are receiving less and less of it. In fact, the after-tax household income of the poor has fallen 12 percent since 1977.

The other news item concerned the death of a Brazilian archbishop, Dom



the
moral
life

By PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

Helder Camara. Camara died in late August at the age of 90. His leadership in our church is in many ways unparalleled. When he participated in the Second Vatican Council, he wore a simple wooden cross, and urged other bishops to give their silver and gold crosses to help the poor. He advocated other external behaviors, such as bishops dropping such titles as eminence and excellency, since these seem based not on scriptural notions of authority but "worldly" ones.

Archbishop Camara is recognized by all who knew him as a brilliant churchman whose moral leadership helped to move the Latin American church toward "a preferential option for the poor." He worked on behalf of this understanding of the church's mission and identity at a time when Catholic power and influence

had come to be associated primarily with the wealthy, and not the poor. A particular mark of his service was his willingness to both help those in need, and to question the policies and systems that produce mass poverty. He spent his life working to change those systems.

It is this juncture that illustrates the paradox in these two news stories. Dom Helder often voiced a reality that relates quite directly to the statistics about wealth and poverty in our own country. At one point he put it this way: "When I feed the poor, they call me a saint; when I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist."

This phrase communicates well a two-fold truth that often occurs when churches try to advocate on behalf of the poor. We seem to be much more comfortable offering direct assistance to the poor than we do trying to change the structures that keep people poor. Somehow, we are still drawn to the notion that political action, economic organizing and structural reform are somehow opposed to religion and the activity of faith.

But I think we need to move beyond the false separation between these realms.

Out of a specifically religious duty, Christians are called to work through po-

litical and economic activity to grant access to those currently excluded from the social and economic goods that we all share as citizens of this country. Right now, many theorists contend that the concentration of income growth at the top levels of our society results largely from rules set in Congress. In the words of one MIT professor of economics, Frank Levy, the situation involves more than simply the play of the market.

"Markets are obviously very important in the economy, but they are surrounded by a lot of rules — rules about how easy it is to organize unions and how free trade is — and those rules are determined by the political process and those rules right now are shaped by money."

In his analysis, the money that shapes these sorts of rules includes the "big money" donated to political candidates.

Our nation is facing a moral failure in terms of the distribution of our wealth. The two news stories, of Archbishop Camara and the growing economic gap, can remain paradoxical, or they can work together to urge us all to become more politically active on behalf of the poor because of our convictions of faith.

...

Sister Schoelles is president of St. Bernard's Institute.

REVEREND MOTHER...

Innovative...
Hilarious...
Refreshing...
Unique

Phyl Contestable of "Nonsense" fame makes House Calls. She'll deliver Reverend Mother to your... wedding...bar mitzvah...birthday... anniversary...retirement...mother-in-law! - a ROAST they'll long remember

If "LAUGHTER IS THE BEST MEDICINE"... she provides a healthy dose!

Call Now 442-4363

to reserve Reverend Mother for any special occasion
Last minute or long range events



HART MONUMENT COMPANY

Since 1856

Monuments, Markers
and Cemetery Lettering

2301 Dewey Avenue
(OPPOSITE HOLY SEPULCHRE CEMETERY)
(716) 865-6746

Looking for Quality Printing?

Call us for:

Letterhead
& Envelopes

Through a special arrangement between Wayuga Press and the Catholic Courier Graphics Department, you can now get quality, affordable typesetting and printing.

Give us a call for your next job!
COURIER GRAPHICS • 716-328-4340
WAYUGA PRESS • 315-754-6229

The Hurlbut

A Tradition of Quality Care

We are a full service medical facility providing the following services for the comfort of our patients and residents:

- Comprehensive rehabilitation services for short term stays
- Specialized care services in the form of infusion therapy, wound care and management, tracheostomy, colostomy, ileostomy, and gastrostomy tube care, hospice care
- Skilled nursing care and rehabilitation for those in need of long term placement
- Physical, occupational, speech therapy

Admissions and tours
available 7 days a week

1177 Henrietta Rd. Rochester, NY 14623
(716) 424-4770 Fax (716) 424-1922

no more snoring...



with

Somnoplastysm

A simple, effective, pain-free office treatment.
Resume normal activities immediately after this procedure.
Call today for a consultation and discover new relief.

Jules Musinger, M.D., F.A.C.S.

Suite 115 • 1561 Long Pond Rd.
Rochester, NY 14626
225-5900

Suite 508 • 220 Alexander St.
Rochester, NY 14607
442-4220

Haven't you suffered from hearing loss long enough?

Now a hearing aid that is so small and easy to use not even your closest friends will know you are wearing it.

- Easily inserted and out of sight
- Volume control automatically adjusts
- New sound processing allows you to hear speech better



with Starkeys



Sequel multi-channel digitally programmable hearing aid
Call today to schedule a complimentary hearing aid evaluation and demonstration of this new technology.

Better Hearing Centers
227-9920

1561 Long Pond Road • Suite 115 220 Alexander Street • Suite 508
at the Park Ridge Professional Bldg. at the Genesee Hospital Professional Bldg.